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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Markham, W. T., & Hannemann, C. (2008). Clueless in the city: conceptualizations of the city in German environmentalism. In K.-S. Rehberg (Ed.), *Die Natur der Gesellschaft: Verhandlungen des 33. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Kassel 2006. Teilbd. 1 u. 2* (pp. 2972-2985). Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verl. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-151459>

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# Clueless in the City: Conceptualizations of the City in German Environmentalism<sup>\*</sup>

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Although problems of global warming have recently become the subject of broad public discussion, there is a continuing deficit in conceptualizing how urbanity as *the* modern way of life fits with nature and the environment. Contemporary urban sociologists have rarely concerned themselves with the environmental consequences of urban life, and the German urban sociologist Ipsen (1998) argues that, with rare exceptions, the relationship between the city and nature has not been systematically analyzed at the societal level at all. Even though the historically developed relationship between city and nature structures the material, political and social form of the city and the development of the modern city largely determines society's relationship with nature. There are only two efforts to analyze these relationships: The German urban sociologists Häußermann and Siebel have analyzed the relationship of nature and city as an antinomy between urbanity and ecology (Häußermann/Siebel 1987), while the US-American urban sociologist David Harvey (1996) offers a research program that incorporates environmental issues using a dialectical concept of urban processes. According to Harvey, the flows of funds and the forms of cooperation and competition that characterize urban development are systematically and reciprocally linked to transformations of the ecosystem.

»It is fundamentally mistaken (...) to speak of the impact of society on the ecosystem as if these are two separate systems in interaction with each other. The typical manner of depicting the world around us in terms of a box labelled »society« in interaction with a box labelled »environment« (...) makes little intuitive sense.« (Harvey 1996: 186)

Curiously, environmentalists themselves have also neglected the relationship between city and environment, especially at the national level. Environmental activists deal with the implications of urban life for the environment only episodically, and these matters remain largely divorced from the central concerns of their ideologies and programs. As a result, even though German environmentalism can be credited with notable successes in the greening of cities – primarily due to the very effective

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<sup>\*</sup> This paper is a revised version from a much longer paper draft available on request from the first author.

efforts of local and regional activists to work through existing institutional and legal structures to protect the environment – German environmentalism at the national level continues to neglect the environmental consequences of an urban society.

Drawing on an analysis of selected publications from Germany's four largest and most influential environmental organizations, the German League for Environmental and Nature Protection (BUND), the German Nature Protection League (NABU), the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Greenpeace, this paper documents the nature and extent of German environmentalism's inattention to the environmental consequences of an urban life. And at the same time it might be to some extent an explanation for the difficulty to integrate environmental issues into urban sociology.

We begin with a brief exploration of the environmental implications of cities and attempts to separate these effects analytically from the effects of industrialization and demographic change with which they have been intertwined. Following a brief description of data sources and research methods, the major part of the analysis looks at the amount and kinds of attention the four organizations give to urban environmental problems in their public statements and programming. A final section offers some first explorations of the possible reasons for contemporary environmentalism's inattention to cities.

## The Environmental Effects of Cities

The early concern of German environmentalism with the environmental impact of cities was far from misplaced, even if the strong anti-urban sentiments with which it was associated were oversimplified and based more on ideology. The long history of the German *Großstadtkritik* is a very characteristic tradition for this thinking (Bergmann 1970).

### »False Positives:« Effects of Industrialization or Population Growth

Early environmentalists blamed the city for all manner of environmental ills, including resource depletion, pollution, and the destruction of cultural landscapes, wilderness, and beloved species. In part, their ire was misdirected, for population growth, industrialization, and rising consumption levels have major impacts on resource use, pollution, human health, and ecosystems regardless of whether population is concentrated in cities or not. Their confusion is, nevertheless, understandable. Population growth, industrialization and urbanization occurred more or less

simultaneously in Germany, and early environmentalists had not had the chance to observe societies where rapid population growth occurred without industrialization or where urbanization outpaced population growth. Moreover, it can be argued that, given the technologies available, the industrialization of Germany during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries could not have occurred without urbanization, and the critics of urbanization were acutely aware that the centers of power and cultural change driving the transformation of German society were based in cities.

Present day German environmentalists, confronted with ongoing processes of globalization, deindustrialization, and ecological modernization, are less likely to assume a one-to-one correspondence between cities and resource consumption and pollution. Nevertheless, environmentalists in Germany and elsewhere continue to blame cities for the destruction of nature or cultural landscapes. Such attributions usually confound population growth with urbanization and are generally incorrect. Because cities are almost invariably the most densely populated of human settlements, they consume less land per person than other settlement patterns. Moreover, more dispersed settlement patterns tend to fragment wilderness, producing more degradation than a few larger settlements. However, insofar as urban sprawl reduces densities, involves leapfrogging development that fragments the landscape, or leads to the development of »edge cities,« cities might come to approximate other settlement patterns in its impact on wilderness and ecosystems, so such developments are clearly of concern (Pebbley 1998; Ipsen 1998; Palen 2005).

### Negative Effects of Cities

On the other hand, it is easy to identify potentially adverse environmental consequences of urbanization alone that should be of concern to environmentalists. We discuss four such consequences below.

First, because they concentrate population in small areas, cities necessarily concentrate the generation and discharge of human waste, waste water, solid waste, air pollutants, storm water runoff and heat from everyday living and production processes in a limited area. Industrialization, high consumption levels, and high levels of mobility within urban areas increase the volume of these discharges and in general their toxicity as well. Paved areas and buildings radiate heat back to the environment, and sealed surfaces increase storm water runoff. The volume or toxicity of discharges into a limited area may overwhelm the ability of air, surface or ground water, or soil to absorb them. The results of these developments include heat islands, flooding, and threats to human health, flora and fauna, and ecosystems in the immediate area of cities. These effects may also occur in other areas where

flows of water, air movements, or disposal systems constructed by humans take them. Filtering, waste treatment, and the ecological modernization of industrial production and consumption can reduce the volume and toxicity of the waste; however, some filtering and treatment processes produce new and potentially dangerous waste products, such as incinerator ash or sewage treatment sludge. Waste products can be more widely dispersed through methods like taller smokestacks or redirected to alternative locations, such as remote landfills, where they are less threatening to humans or ecosystems; however, some of these methods, such as transferring solid waste to distant landfills, require heavy expenditures of energy. To the extent that measures to reduce and treat potentially harmful discharges can realize economies of scale, including employing more effective technologies, the volume and toxicity of discharges per person will be lower in cities than for a more widely dispersed population of the same size with equivalent levels of industrialization and consumption; however, these economies of scale must be very large in order to offset the effects of concentrating the discharges in a small area. Cities also realize economies of scale in transportation by concentrating population and reduced trip length (Berry 1990; Benneh 1994; Southwick 1996; Pebley 1998; Hunter 2000).

Second, all other things equal, cities are noisier environments than areas of less dense settlement. Denser settlement means that sources of noise from neighbors, production processes, traffic, deliveries, and entertainment facilities are closer at hand than in less densely settled areas. Careful land use planning, technological improvements, such as improved aircraft engines or building insulation, and legal regulations that limit the volume and timing of noise emissions can reduce noise pollution in cities; however, similar efforts would also reduce noise in non-urban settings, and their application in urban areas is unlikely to reduce noise levels to levels comparable to small towns or rural areas.

Third, cities concentrate demands for natural resources in limited geographic areas. Depending on the size of an urban population and its level of consumption and on the supply of resources available locally and the rate at which they regenerate, cities can easily exceed the threshold of sustainability. With their high densities and large populations, modern cities invariably exceed the sustainable yield of soils and forests in their immediate vicinity, and they frequently make unsustainable demands on ground or surface water. These problems can be mitigated by importing resources from elsewhere, but the transportation of resources requires extensive consumption of resources and energy to construct and operate transportation systems and aqueducts. Dispersing urban populations to areas where fertile soils, water and wood are readily available has the potential to avoid local resource exhaustion and reduce the transportation costs. On the other hand, where production processes require raw materials, semi-finished products, and energy supplies not available locally and consumers demand food products and consumer goods that

cannot be produced locally, urbanization offers considerable economies of scale in constructing and operating transportation systems. Calculation of the overall effects of urbanization on sustainable resource use is only possible for specific systems; however, the reasoning above suggests that 1) cities typically place non-sustainable demands on local natural resources, which may result in exhaustion of these resources and require importing resources and agricultural products at considerable environmental costs, and 2) the environmental benefits of dispersing an urban population to reduce the need to transport food and other resources can easily be offset by losing the benefits of economies of scale in transportation, especially where the industrial processes or consumers require a wide array of resources not available locally (Benneh 1994; Southwick 1996; Pebley 1998; Hunter 2000).

Fourth, cities separate people from wilderness and attractive cultural landscapes, a separation that some environmentalists have argued is unhealthy. For example, some argue that modern society puts individuals under mental strain by forcing them to constantly pay attention to a multitude of stimuli and that they need restorative environments to recover. Nature is viewed the restorative environment *par excellence*. Others relate human affection for natural landscapes to the evolutionary roots of *Homo Sapiens*. Still others, less biologically inclined, link appreciation for natural beauty to social, economic, and cultural trends by grounding it in a long-standing cultural tradition first articulated in its modern form by Romanticism. This »Arcadian« appreciation of nature, once the province of elites, has spread to broader categories of citizens, paralleling increasing income and leisure opportunities and a growing separation from nature in daily work. Such arguments are open to dispute, but they are supported by the longstanding tendency of urban dwellers to seek leisure and recreation in nature and by high levels of contributions to nature protection organizations. Moreover, direct experience in nature may be an important mechanism through which people come to appreciate nature and to support environmental movements (Ipsen 1998; Van Koppen 2000; Markham, forthcoming).

In short, although environmentalists have sometimes erroneously confounded the environmental effects of urbanization with the effects of industrialization and population growth, there are very good reasons for environmentalists to concern themselves with the ecological impact of cities. The purpose of the following presentation of research is to determine the extent to which large environmental organizations in present day Germany actually do so.

## Research Methods

To examine environmentalists' conceptualizations cities and their impact on the environment and the concrete programs through which they seek to meliorate these effects we focus on data from the four largest German environmental organizations with national scope: the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), Greenpeace, the Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland (BUND) and the Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU). While these organizations represent only one part of the broader environmental movement, we focus on them for four reasons. First, they are generally acknowledged to be the most influential environmental organizations and are often viewed as constituting the backbone of German environmentalism (Blühdorn 1995; Bammerlin 1998; Markham, forthcoming). Second, expanding the paper to include smaller organizations, local citizens' initiatives with environmental goals, or the Green Party would call for a book length manuscript rather than a paper. Third, it is by no means clear that the Green Party today is appropriately described as part of the environmental movement. Finally, at the practical level, it is easy to obtain information about the views and the work of the large environmental organizations because they maintain extensive programs of publication and an extensive Internet presence, while gathering information about local citizens' initiatives presents extremely difficult sampling and data collection issues.

These four large organizations dominate the environmental organizational landscape in Germany today. Today, they report a total of about 1.6 million supporters, ranging from 548,000 (Greenpeace) to 284,000 (BUND). All are underrepresented in eastern Germany, and NABU and BUND are overrepresented in southern Germany. WWF, BUND, NABU, and Greenpeace have annual receipts ranging from 19 million Euro (BUND) to 41 million Euro (Greenpeace). All except BUND report increases of at least 20 percent over the past five years (Markham, forthcoming).

The activity repertoires of the organizations are similar, though not identical. All engage in public education via publications, press releases, and internet sites, and all publish a member magazine or newsletter. Greenpeace also publishes a general circulation magazine. All work to influence politics through lobbying and submission of expert reports, position papers, and testimony, but BUND is the most active in this area. All also engage in at least occasional public protest, and Greenpeace continues to stage its trademark spectacular actions. BUND and Greenpeace are generally viewed as more confrontational, but both cooperate at times with government and business. NABU has an especially strong commitment to the purchase and operation of nature reserves. Greenpeace and the DNR do not have them (Blühdorn 1995; Bergstedt 2002; Bammerlin 1998; Markham, forthcoming).

### Data Sources

The data we use to determine how the four organizations look at the role of the city in causing environmental problems and at their campaigns and programs related to urban environmental problems come from four sources:

1. A detailed content analysis of the Internet pages of the four organizations plus the fifth largest national organization, the Greenpeace spinoff, Robin Wood, conducted by the first author and Sabrina Broselow in 1998. A description of the research methodology has been published elsewhere (Markham 1999). Although these data were gathered over eight years ago they are especially useful because they involved a detailed sentence by sentence coding of the information on the Internet pages and because they analyzed the organizations' web sites at a time when they were small and new and presumably included only the most important information the organizations wanted to convey to the public. A detailed set of tables for the content analysis, based on a longer conference paper by Markham and Broselow, was published subsequently in a book by Felbinger (2005).
2. A page-by-page reading of all issues of the member magazines of WWF, BUND, and NABU and of all issues of Greenpeace's newsletter for its supporters published between 1998 and 2000. During this period member magazines remained the organizations' major means of communication with their supporters.
3. A page-by-page reading of all four organizations' annual reports for 2004 and 2005 (Greenpeace 2005, 2006; WWF 2005, 2006; BUND 2005, 2006; NABU 2005, 2006). Annual reports summarize the organizations' main accomplishments for their supporters and for other relevant constituencies.
4. An examination of the organizations' Internet pages conducted in September 2006. The Internet sites have emerged as a prime means of communication with supporters, the press, and the general public, and all four organizations maintain very large sites. Indeed, the amount of information available on the Internet sites today can be almost overwhelming, and the sites sometimes contain clearly outdated pages, such as those referring to the SPD/Green government which had left office almost a year ago. Several also archive old press releases reaching back for several years. We attempted to cope with this complexity as an ordinary reader who was browsing an Internet site might do. We began with the home page and explored at least briefly all the major avenues available from clicking on the options presented there. Where a path showed promise of leading to information about cities and environment we pursued it as far as it led; however,



we never examined news press statements issued before 2005, even when these were available on the site.

## Results

This section summarizes the content of the information distributed by the four organizations. We summarize it in the same order as the list of sources in the preceding section.

### Content Analysis of 1998 Internet Sites

The content analysis classified the substance of each paragraph in a number of ways; however, only four of these are relevant to this research. Under the heading »undesirable practices or trends,« we classified references to ongoing developments that were described by the organizations as unfavorable. Across all organizations, 34 percent of the paragraphs cited such developments, but references to specifically urban environmental problems were notable by their absence. About one percent of paragraphs mentioned excess reliance on private autos, but not all of these paragraphs had a specifically urban context.

The category »desirable trends and practices« cataloged references to ongoing or potential practices or trends that would be favorable for the environment. Nine percent of the paragraphs contained mentions of such practices or trends; however, the trends cited most often, such as recycling or reducing pesticide use, were equally applicable to urban or non-urban settings. About one percent of paragraphs mentioned alternatives to auto use; however, some of these were not specifically relevant to cities.

The category »humanity as victim or beneficiary« of environmental conditions – mentioned in 19 percent of paragraphs – included references to ways in which environmental conditions affect human welfare. Fourteen percent of paragraphs made only nonspecific references to the impact of the environment on general human welfare or the welfare of future generations. The health effects of polluted air were mentioned in three percent of paragraphs on the Greenpeace website, but these were not necessarily references to specific urban conditions.

The category »nature as beneficiary« included references to parts of nature that were harmed by environmental problems or could benefit from their melioration.

Forty-two percent of paragraphs contained such references, but references to urban animals or urban parks were all but invisible.

In short, when the organizations first established their Internet presence, the issues and developments they chose to emphasize devoted almost no attention to specifically urban environmental issues or to the impact of cities on the environment. This does not demonstrate that the organizations did not concern themselves with such issues at all, but it does suggest that they did not give them a central role.

#### Analysis of Member Magazines, 1998–2000

The examination of the organization's member magazines and newsletters led to very much the same conclusion. In overview, our examination of the member magazines for the four organizations – publications aimed at their own supporters – showed little evidence of a major commitment to combating urban environmental problems and almost no interest in the effects of urban agglomerations on nature. Coverage of these issues was all but absent from the WWF and Greenpeace materials and surfaced relatively infrequently in NABU's *Naturschutz Heute*. Stories linking cities to environmental problems appeared with regularity only in BUND's member magazine, but even here they represented only a small percentage of total content and were overshadowed by many more stories about nature protection and general articles about environmental problems or policy. Equally significant is the fact that many articles that could easily have been framed in terms of urban problems are not, in fact, framed this way. Moreover, even articles that explicitly address urban problems typically do so in a piecemeal, laundry list fashion. That is, it appears that no model of the environmental significance of cities has emerged to replace the oversimplified anti-city models of the pre-World War II era.

#### Annual Reports, 2004–2005

Overall, the annual reports – prepared not only the organizations' supporters, but also for other constituencies and the general public – place little emphasis on the environmental problems of cities or the role of urbanization in producing environmental problems. Some references to these issues do occur in BUND's annual reports, but these isolated discussions of specific problems or solutions remain far from adding up to a systematic attempt to conceptualize city and environment or to develop and execute a program of action to deal with urban environmental problems. NABU, which did have a major campaign against urban sprawl comes a bit closer to this ideal, but the campaign focuses on only a single issue and does not

situate sprawl in the context of a thorough discussion of the relationship between city and environment.

#### Internet Sites, 2006

We also examined the organizations' internet sites, today the most complete source of information about them. These sites, which contain an enormous amount of information, are designed for reading by the organization's supporters, the press, and interested citizens. Examination of the web sites suggested that none of them accorded urban environmental problems or the impact of cities on their environment a prominent place. References to these issues were all but absent from the web sites of Greenpeace and WWF, and none of the organizations give urban issues much prominence on their home pages or in their most general goals statements. NABU and BUND do provide a significant amount of material about cities and the environment, but it remains a small fraction of the whole and, with the exception of NABU's »nature as neighbor« campaign, it does not occupy a very visible place on their web sites. Although both organizations describe and suggest solutions for a number of environmental problems of cities, only their discussions of sprawl – and to a more limited extent NABU's document on traffic and transportation, approach offering a comprehensive analysis of urban environmental problems or an integrated plan for solving them based on this analysis. None of the organizations come near to providing a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between city and environment or a comprehensive program for dealing with the issues such an analysis would raise.

#### Conclusions and Implications

German environmentalism originated in the context of a diverse array of efforts to manage, roll back, or protest the processes of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization that transformed Germany during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. The predecessors of today's environmental movement regarded the effects of cities on human life and nature as predominantly negative, and concerns about cities remained a central component of environmental thought and activism until World War II. The confrontational environmental movement of the 1970s and 1980s echoed some of the early concerns about the implications of cities for the environment, but, overall, post-war German environmentalism has been marked by abiding neglect of the environmental implications of cities.

German environmentalism was born in a wave of cultural critique and activism spurred by modernization, industrialization, population growth, and urbanization. Although the various groups that supported what we today call environmental causes differed in the emphases and in the details of their analysis of the problems, most saw environmental problems as inextricably connected to the growth of cities. This viewpoint was, in part, a predictable result of the simultaneous rise of urbanization, population growth, and industrialization, which made it hard to separate them; however, it also drew support from the prominent position of anti-modernist and anti-urban ideologies among German intellectuals at the turn of the Twentieth Century. By portraying cities as profoundly unnatural and inhuman – and as foreign to the nature of the German *Volke* – these turn of the century ideologists forged a strong connection between protection of nature and anti-urban sentiments, which endured for a half century.

This state of affairs greatly hindered the development of a satisfactory analysis of the role of cities in producing environmental problems. Practical minded people, such as those who worked to reduce urban pollution or protect endangered bird species, often pursued their work without much reference to dominant anti-urban ideologies, but they failed to develop an alternative to the dominant anti-urban view. Others, including groups as diverse as the League for Homeland Protection, the Friends of Nature, and the Bavarian League for Nature Protection, and advocates of parks and garden cities, framed their efforts within this anti-urban framework. Nature and city dwellers were to be protected from the influence of cities, and urban dwellers could find redemption only through escape to green areas within or outside cities, if indeed they could be saved at all.

Germany would no doubt have eventually made peace with the undeniable and irreversible reality of its own urbanization, but the Nazis and World War II brought culturally conservative anti-urbanism to a clearly punctuated and inglorious end. *Gleichschaltung* and the War also destroyed or greatly weakened most organizations with environmental objectives, and the postwar situation refocused attention in both East and West Germany on rebuilding shattered societies and shattered cities. Ideological views of the city remained in the background in the West, while the GDR set out to build new socialist centers of industry, albeit with equally little thought to the implications for the environment. Nature protection advocates in both the Federal Republic and the GDR resumed their work after the war; however, where the city was concerned, they labored in an ideological vacuum. It is hardly surprising that they focused their attention on practical nature protection efforts in the countryside.

Deteriorating environmental conditions, many of them clearly centered in cities, and changing social conditions eventually called forth environmental movements in both Germanys. In the West, the movement's more extreme advocates railed

against industrial pollution, big business, consumerism, and rigid government bureaucracies, but they remained curiously silent about cities. Perhaps this is because they were more likely to be urban squatters than rural romantics, or perhaps anti-urban ideologies simply retained too many associations with the discredited ideologies of the past. In any case, their efforts to understand and combat the influence of consumerism, capitalism, and unresponsive government on environmental problems were not coupled with an analysis of the relationship between cities and environmental threats. Citizen's initiatives did work at the practical level to improve urban life, but the anti-nuclear crusade soon relegated them to the margins of the movement. And, as anti-pollution measure took effect, nuclear power development stalled out, countercultural ideologies faded and problems associated with reunification and economic stagnation multiplied, the environmental movement itself lost steam (Markham, forthcoming).

Concerns about the urban environment were more evident in the movement that brought down the GDR, perhaps because disastrous government energy, industry, urban development, and housing policies made the problems more visible. Nevertheless, GDR environmentalists were no more successful than their Western counterparts in developing a comprehensive view of the city, and their hour of triumph was too brief to bring about major change. Only remnants of GDR environmentalism survived the Reunification, with the rest assimilated into organizations from the Federal Republic.

Indeed, the evidence presented above suggests that German environmentalism today, at least as exemplified by the largest environmental organizations, remains »ratlos in der Stadt«. It often raises concerns about specific environmental problems that are concentrated in cities: air and water pollution, dense traffic, abandoned brown fields, and waste disposal; however, it typically does so without placing them in an explicitly urban context or problematizing the city itself. Indeed, by examining the publications of Greenpeace and WWF one would hardly know that cities are ecologically problematic at all. NABU and BUND have more to say about cities, but they neither place them at the center of their analysis nor devote major programmatic attention to them. Instead of asking whether cities are ecologically sustainable and on what terms, they recommend reforms like filtering industrial emissions and diesel exhaust. Only in their efforts to understand the causes and effects of sprawl – and to a more limited extent urban traffic problems – do they come close to developing a theoretically grounded analysis of the sources of the problems or an integrated set of solutions, but even here specific problems are considered in isolation.

What barriers stand in the way of making the city more central to understanding environmental problems? In the first place, analyzing the effects of cities on the environment is a complex and demanding exercise. The brief sketch above shows

that it is not impossible to make a beginning, but the results are not easy to explain in simple terms. And simple framings and oversimplified explanations, like the anti-city ideologies of the late Nineteenth Century, not complex and qualified conclusions, are the stuff from which successful social movements are constructed (Hannigan 1995).

It is not, however, difficult to imagine other explanations. A successful effort to problematize the city in ecological terms might, for example, lead to policy recommendations that would be less than palatable to the mass of prosperous upper middle class supporters who form the backbone of the environmental organizations – not to mention Green Party – support today (Markham, forthcoming). Even the organizations' critical analysis of sprawl and their recommendations for reforms to reduce it are apt to be unattractive to some of their supporters, and it is perhaps for this reason that treatments of the topic tend to be buried in technical reports and out of the way web pages rather than featured prominently in annual reports. A careful analysis of the total burden of concentrated urban emissions, noise, resource consumption was not, in the end, sustainable, the readjustments required to reduce the urban ecological footprint: reduced consumption and deconcentration of population to smaller centers, might prove unpalatable indeed.

Finally, it can be argued that anti-sprawl campaigns and recent rhetoric and demonstration projects about urban sustainability (Brand, forthcoming) have helped to divert attention away from asking hard questions about cities and the environment, just as rhetorics about ecological modernization and reforms that reduce emissions divert attention from the continually increasing ecological footprint of industrialized societies (Blühdorn 2000).

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